



STANDING YOUR GROUND IN SOMEONE ELSE'S SHOES

Communication Skills to Improve Work Relationships

Do you ever go to work dreading a conversation with *that* co-worker? If you're like most people, there are people at work you mesh with and others you find difficult. For the sake of meeting your work goals and for your own happiness on the job, developing satisfactory relationships with even the difficult people is important. And one of the things you can do to improve work relationships is to improve your communication skills.

A NEW PAIR OF SHOES

Putting yourself in your co-worker's shoes can be difficult, but it's the first step toward better communication. Start by accepting that the other person's personality type, work style, goals and/or priorities may be different than yours. For example:

- Someone with a detail-oriented work style may want to make sure all i's are dotted before moving forward, while a higher-level thinker might be more interested in pushing a product to market as soon as possible.
- A sales person might base a decision on what will improve sales; a customer service representative may be more concerned with member/client satisfaction.

Seeing things from your co-worker's point of view doesn't mean you have to agree with him; it means understanding where he's coming from and being open to a dialogue.

ACTIVE LISTENING

Ready for that two-way conversation? The next step is active listening. Instead of mentally fuming while the other person speaks or thinking about how to "defend" against her comments, make a real effort to take in what she's saying. The following techniques help you pay attention and tell the other person you're listening:

- Give nonverbal signals: maintain eye contact, nod or interject "okay" or "mm-hmm" when the other person makes a point. Your body posture says a lot, and the speaker picks up on and responds to your nonverbal cues.
- Repeat back, in the other person's words or your own, the speaker's salient points. You might say, for example, "What I hear you saying is..." and restate her point. The other person will feel heard and have the opportunity to clarify anything you've misunderstood.

VALIDATION

You've shown you've heard the other person; next, validate what they've said by commenting on the merit of their point of view. You might say, "I understand how you can see things that way," or "What you're saying makes some sense." After statements such as these, it's time to express *your* point of view.

Validation is a powerful communication skill that increases the chance that the other person will be an active listener and appreciate what you're saying. Good communication skills are contagious!

STANDING YOUR GROUND

You've listened, you've validated. Now you want to make sure your opinions are being heard as well! That's where assertiveness comes in.

Assertive individuals recognize that every one of us has rights and responsibilities. They speak up for their own best interests while taking others' interests into account as well. The basic message sent by an assertive person is, "I'm okay and you're okay."

An aggressive person, on the other hand, recognizes his or her own rights but ignores the rights of others, often using aggressive (or passive-aggressive) language, or aggressive body language (such as leaning in, glaring or pointing).

To improve your work relationships, it's important to communicate assertively, but not aggressively. Try these tips:

- Stand straight and steady, and maintain eye contact.
- Speak in a clear, steady and audible voice.
- Speak fluently, without hesitation, and with assurance and confidence. (Try stating your point of view without prefacing it with "I think" or "Maybe.")

If this is a challenge for you, practice in "low-risk" situations, such as when you're returning defective merchandise to the store. You can also practice in your head, by imagining yourself in a typical work or life situation, or in the mirror.

ONE FINAL TIP

In this age of email, it's easy to avoid face-to-face communication, even with co-workers who sit across the aisle. Email has countless advantages, but it can also be dehumanizing. When you're deciding whether to send an email or have a face-to-face discussion, know that a warm "good morning" and a smile can go a long way toward improving communication.

This article is for informational and self-help purposes only. It should not be treated as a substitute for legal or financial advice, or as a substitute for consultation with a qualified professional.

Build a Winning Team!

Call MHN for Management Consultation and Training

MHN provides a host of employer services to help managers and supervisors foster teamwork and overcome supervisory challenges. Some training hours are included at no additional cost with your EAP, and other services are available on a fee-for-service basis. Options include:

- Workshops for employees, including Effective Workplace Communication, Dealing with Difficult People, and Resolving Conflict in the Workplace
- Management workshops, including Building Effective Teams and Creating a Positive Work Environment
- Onsite services to help resolve difficult workplace issues, ranging from workplace needs assessment and organizational development to change management and critical incident response.

For more information, call

(866) EAP-4SOC

(866) 327-4627

TDD callers, please dial (800) 327-0801

Or visit us online at:

www.eap4soc.mhn.com

(register with the access code "SOC")



www.mhn.com

© 2007 MHN, Inc. All rights reserved.